

Island Packet: Federal action on illegal immigration overdue ...

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Federal action on illegal immigration overdue, say local leaders in response to Arizona law

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Whatever their view of Arizona's controversial new law, some local leaders generally agree that action by the federal government on immigration is long overdue.

"Until the federal government secures the borders, states are going to take action into their own hands," said Beaufort County Sheriff P.J. Tanner. "States are going to begin competing to combat illegal immigration. The state with the toughest law wins, and the one with the weakest law loses."

Signed into law by Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer last week, the legislation requires immigrants to carry identification and proof they are in the country legally or face arrest and deportation. The law also gives police the ability to verify the immigration status of anyone they suspect of being illegal.

Eric Esquivel, publisher of La Isla magazine, a Spanish-language magazine in Beaufort County, said Arizona's new law is "absolutely backward."

"What does an illegal immigrant look like? The reality is, we know it's going to target Latinos. ... Economically, it's a catastrophe for the state of Arizona -- both for its citizens and for tourism."

Former Beaufort County Council member Dick Stewart said he thought Arizona's law would "initiate discrimination" against those suspected of being illegal aliens, including Native Americans.

"Unlike a good law, it was intended to create a federal reaction as opposed to solving a local problem," Stewart said. "The federal government has a responsibility to deal with the issue in a responsible fashion."

U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., agreed that the federal government hasn't done enough to quell the influx of undocumented immigrants into border states.

"The first situation is that the federal government should enforce the laws we have, which would begin by securing the borders," Wilson said Friday in Bluffton. "Legal immigration has been a blessing to this country. It's how most of us got here. Every country in the world has immigration laws, it seems only America isn't enforcing them."

Tanner and Stewart stopped short of suggesting South Carolina lawmakers adopt similar legislation.

"Arizona is absolutely inundated with an illegal immigration population that we don't have here," Tanner said. "There is a huge difference between South Carolina and Arizona or any other border state."

According to a study by the Pew Hispanic Center, Arizona's illegal immigrant population is as high as 575,000, while South Carolina's is between 40,000 and 100,000. About 11.5 million illegal immigrants live in the United States, according to the study.

Stewart said the federal government should follow a "blended approach" in overhauling immigration law.

"One would be a path for people who want to stay and one would be enforcing laws that are on the books and not letting our borders be porous for people to come and go as they please," Stewart said. "Some of these immigrants are folks we would like to have in this country. We want to have (their) talents and skills. It is what has always made America great."

Esquivel agrees.

"When you think about the Hilton Head area or this community, we really need to talk about real workable reform and take a serious look at economic contributions of the Latino community," he said. "Latinos have a positive economic impact here, both on the community of Hilton Head and in the state."

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